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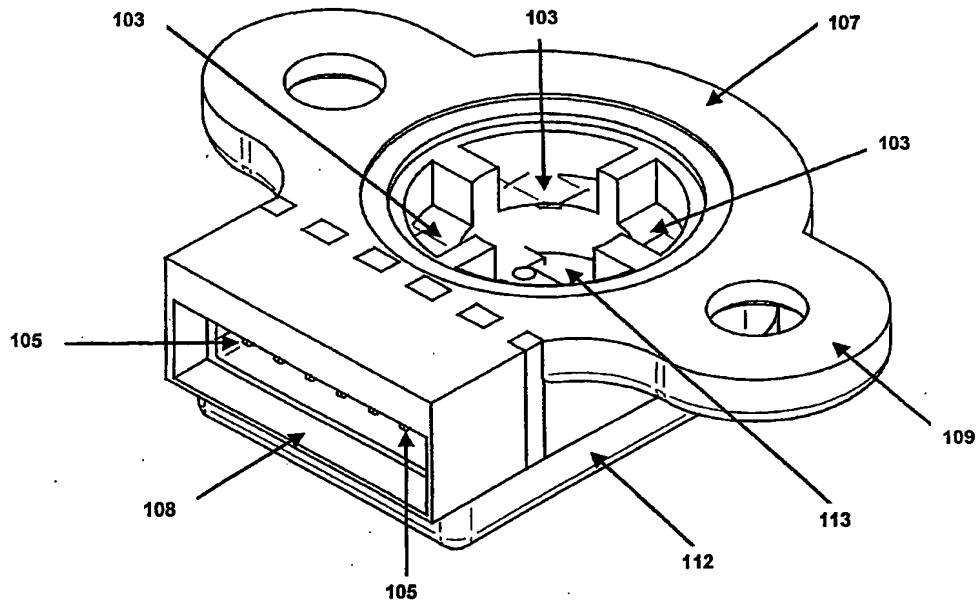
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(54) Title: GAS SENSING DEVICE



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(57) Abstract: A device for sensing a gas comprises a plastics housing (106, 107) moulded in situ around at least one portion of a conducting lead frame (100), the housing defining an enclosure (113) and being provided with means for enabling gas flow into the enclosure. A gas sensitive element (114) within the enclosure (113) is mounted to the conducting lead frame (100). The conducting lead frame (100) comprises connection leads which are accessible through, and at least partially encapsulated by, the wall of the housing.



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GAS SENSING DEVICE

This invention relates to a device for sensing a gas, in particular a flammable gas, in air.

5 Catalytic oxidation is a well established and often used method for detecting flammable gases in which an element is heated in order to oxidise any flammable gas present. During oxidation, heat is evolved which causes the temperature of the element to rise and results in an 10 increase in its electrical resistance which may be detected to indicate the presence of a flammable gas. Typically, the element comprises a filament of thin metal wire on which a porous bead is formed which includes a catalyst. Commonly, one such element is used in conjunction with a 15 second, of similar construction but catalytically inactive, in a Wheatstone bridge circuit. Thus the inert element may act as a control, compensating for variations in ambient temperature. To ensure combustion of the flammable gas, the elements must be operated at an elevated temperature, of 20 the order of 500°C.

To ensure safe operation of such a device, the elements must be enclosed within a housing which prevents gas outside the device being ignited by the gas undergoing combustion inside. However, in order for the device to 25 function, gas must be able to flow into the enclosure. This is achieved by the inclusion of a flame arrestor in the housing, such as a metal mesh or a sinter element, through which gas may enter the device yet an ignition source may not escape.

30 Certain regulations must be met by the housing in order for it to be certified as flameproof and capable of withstanding the rapid and significant changes which can arise on combustion of the flammable gas inside the device. These changes may be in terms of pressure, temperature, 35 chemical composition etc. All in all, the device must not allow ignition of the external gas mixture, irrespective of

the conditions inside the device. This is achieved by a number of precautions, including:

the use of a flame arrestor to conduct heat away sufficiently rapidly that a flame cannot propagate through 5 this component;

ensuring that the strength of the housing materials and design is sufficient to prevent rupturing as a result of extreme conditions inside; and

10 confirming that any gas expelled from the sensor has insufficient energy to cause an external ignition, for example by limiting its exit rate and temperature.

In virtually all cases, it is necessary to provide the device with components which must pass through the housing wall, for example electrical connectors. This results in 15 gaps between the housing and the protruding component(s) which could allow ignited gas to escape. In such a situation, the device must be provided with one or more layers of potting compound, cement or other encapsulant which serve to seal the gaps and complete the flameproof 20 enclosure. At present, there are regulations which specify the minimum thickness of such layers. In the UK, the potting compound typically has a minimum thickness of 3 mm.

The result is a final device size which is significantly larger than the volume required by the 25 operational components alone. It would be advantageous to reduce the size of the final product, and in particular reduce it from a 3 dimensional object to a substantially flat device. This would lead to possible new uses of such a gas sensor, such as a clip-on badge sensor which could be 30 worn by workers in a potentially dangerous industrial situation, for example.

The majority of known flameproof housings are cast 35 from metal and require several millimetres of potting compound and flame arrestor material, as well as impact protection for the flame arrestor in order fully to meet the relevant safety and performance standards. EP-A-0667519 achieves a small reduction in device size by

mounting the gas sensitive elements onto a track carrying substrate such that they may be contained within the thickness of a typical PCB. However, the remainder of the device is largely conventional and hence the final size is 5 not significantly reduced.

GB-B-2328508 describes a method of joining the flame arrestor to the housing which overcomes the need for precision machining and accelerates the fixing operation whilst producing a join which is certifiably flameproof. 10 The invention makes use of a plastics housing which is moulded in situ around the flame arrestor, which is in the form of a metal sinter material. This does not however address the issue of device size.

In accordance with a first aspect of the present 15 invention a device for sensing a gas comprises at least one gas sensitive element contained within a flameproof, plastics housing supporting a flame arrestor which enables gas to flow into the interior of the housing, and the gas sensitive element(s) being connected to conducting leads 20 which are accessible through, and are at least partially encapsulated by, the wall of the housing, the encapsulating wall having sufficient thickness such that the housing will not allow the propagation of an ignition source from within the device to the ambient atmosphere, under working 25 conditions.

This first aspect of the invention further provides a method of manufacturing a device for sensing a gas, the method comprising moulding a plastics housing in situ directly around a set of conducting leads, mounting at 30 least one gas sensitive element inside the housing and connecting it or them to the conducting leads which are accessible through, and at least partially encapsulated by, the wall of the housing, the encapsulating wall having sufficient thickness that the housing will not allow the propagation of an ignition source from within the device to 35 the ambient atmosphere, under working conditions, and securing a flame arrestor to the housing which completes

the flameproof enclosure yet enables gas to flow into the interior.

The present invention eliminates the requirement for a layer of potting compound. By encapsulating a sufficient 5 length of the conducting leads in the plastic wall (by which we mean that there is intimate contact between the wall and the conducting leads), there is no gap at the metal/plastic interface which could allow ignited gas or another such ignition source to escape the flameproof 10 enclosure. Therefore a significant size reduction is possible and a substantially flat device may be constructed. In particular, by enabling the use of electrically insulating (plastic) materials for the enclosure around the electrical connectors, a whole new 15 range of design freedoms are made possible. Previous inventions such as GB-B-2328508 have not recognised such materials as suitable to fulfil this role. One key benefit of the present invention is the ability to arrange that encapsulation occurs in the horizontal plane rather than in 20 a vertical direction as would usually be the case for a practical, compact, potted device.

Preferably, the plastics housing is fabricated by moulding in situ the plastics material directly around the conducting leads. This method not only produces a 25 flameproof seal between the conducting leads and the housing but also simplifies the assembly process, being less expensive and more easily controllable than traditional methods of incorporating electrical connections through the housing wall, which involve potting. Potting 30 requires liquid handling and pouring, and the potting material may undergo contraction during solidification which must be compensated for by making the layer thicker than would otherwise be necessary. It is therefore highly 35 advantageous to form a flameproof seal in one moulding step, without the need for potting.

Preferably, the device further comprises at least one filter in order to remove contaminants from the gas flow

into the device. Certain substances may have a detrimental effect on the operation of the device should they reach the gas sensitive elements, and should therefore be removed by appropriate filters. Generally, at least one filter is 5 provided which removes hydrogen sulphide from the gas flow into the device. Typically, at least one of the filter(s) are inboard of the flame arrestor. This provides some degree of protection and holds them in place without the need for further fixings. However filters may also be 10 located outboard of the flame arrestor, possibly held in place by at least one clip.

The device preferably further comprises means for protecting one or more of the gas sensitive element(s) from shock damage. This aims to minimise damage should the 15 device suffer mechanical shock. Generally, the device further comprises means for insulating the gas sensitive element(s) and electrical connections, either in terms of electrical insulation or heat insulation, or both. Preferably, the protecting and/or insulating means comprise 20 at least one layer of shock absorbent and insulating material. The two functions may be carried out by the same material, provided it is inert, has suitable mechanical properties and low heat conductance. Typically, the shock absorbent and/or insulating material is glass wool.

25 Preferably, the flame arrestor is provided by a metal mesh. This is an advantageous alternative to using a sintered metal powder, since an equivalent flameproof standard may be achieved using a thinner section. Generally, the flame arrestor is joined to the plastics 30 housing by a process of thermal bonding around its perimeter. This is achieved by applying pressure to the periphery via a hot workpiece, and results in a flameproof bond between the flame arrestor and the housing, by means of plastic flow into the voids in the metal mesh.

35 Typically, the device further comprises a compensating element, which behaves similarly to the gas sensitive element except in its response to the gas. When the device

is connected to detector circuitry, the two elements form part of a Wheatstone bridge circuit which provides a signal proportional to the gas concentration. Generally, the gas sensitive element comprises a catalytic bead, such as a 5 pellistor. The compensating element is catalytically inactive. However, the gas sensitive element could also comprise a micromachined or planar pellistor or other types of heated gas sensor, for example semiconductor sensors or those which rely on thermal conductivity to detect gas.

10 Preferably, each gas sensitive element and/or compensating element is positioned at least partly within a recess in an interior wall of the housing. Also preferably, each recess also contains means for the protection and insulation of the gas sensitive element 15 positioned at least partly inside it. This provides further protection against impact damage and reduces heat loss from the gas sensitive elements.

20 The thickness of the portion of the housing wall through which the conducting leads extend is usually substantially at least 6 mm. The length of encapsulation of the conducting leads will be chosen to meet the safety requirements for flameproof certification, which may change 25 in due course as standards evolve.

Although the encapsulation length may be longer than 30 with conventional potted devices, there is greatly increased design freedom. For example, typically, the flame arrestor is located above the gas sensitive element(s), the conducting leads extending out through a side wall of the housing. This has the advantage of making it possible to construct a substantially flat device.

35 Preferably, the conducting leads are coupled with respective contacts located in an integral extension of the housing. This configuration enables the device to be connected to other electrical components in a variety of ways, as may be chosen to suit each respective application.

Conveniently, the conducting leads are provided by a conducting lead frame fabricated prior to encapsulation by

the plastics housing. By "lead frame", we refer to a conducting portion of the device, rather than to a frame made out of lead (Pb). This enables straightforward moulding of the plastics housing directly around the metal, 5 and is more convenient than incorporating more than one component during the moulding process.

Typically, the conducting leads will form pads flush or sub flush to the housing although they could extend or protrude through the housing.

10 In the preferred example, the housing is formed by moulding the plastics material around the lead frame and subsequently mounting the other components. However in some situations it may be more appropriate to mould the housing around more of the components, in situ. For 15 example, the gas sensitive element(s) could be connected to the lead frame before the housing is moulded.

20 Preferably, the device further comprises means for retaining components located outboard of the flame arrestor. Typically, the retaining means is provided by a bezel which fastens mechanically to the housing. The bezel also provides some degree of mechanical protection for the flame arrestor and filter(s).

25 In accordance with a second aspect of the invention, a device for sensing a gas comprises a plastics housing moulded in situ around at least one portion of a conducting lead frame, the housing defining an enclosure and being provided with means for enabling gas flow into the enclosure, and at least one gas sensitive element within the enclosure mounted to the conducting lead frame, wherein 30 the conducting lead frame comprises connection leads which are accessible through, and are at least partially encapsulated by, the wall of the housing.

35 This second aspect of the invention further provides a method of manufacturing a device for sensing a gas, the method comprising moulding a plastics housing in situ around at least one portion of a conducting lead frame such that the housing defines an enclosure, providing the

housing with means for enabling gas flow into the enclosure, mounting at least one gas sensitive element inside the enclosure and connecting it to the conducting lead frame, and providing the conducting lead frame with 5 connection leads which are accessible through, and at least partially encapsulated by, the wall of the housing.

By overmoulding the lead frame, the housing acts not only as an enclosure and support for the sensor components and electrical connections but also as insulating means 10 between conducting regions. This makes it possible to reduce the size of the sensor envelope and can simplify the manufacturing process by reducing the number of assembly steps required. .

Generally, portions of the lead frame are left 15 uncovered by the plastics housing. This provides suitable connection points to which electronic components may be mounted. Typically, the device further comprises an electronic component mounted onto at least some of the portions of the conducting lead frame not covered by the 20 plastics housing. Preferably, the electronic component is a memory component, but it could also or alternatively comprise components such as analogue to digital converters, amplifiers or microprocessors mounted in a similar manner. If desired, several electronic components could be 25 connected to the conducting lead frame, the lead frame fulfilling the function of a circuit board in creating the required interconnections. In the case of a memory component, the memory component is preferably an EEPROM although it could be many other types of memory chip. The 30 memory component generally stores data relating to the gas sensitive element, but it could also hold any other information of value to the sensor user, such as date of manufacture, calibration data and temperature compensation coefficients.

35 By attaching an EEPROM or other component directly to the lead frame, it becomes an integral part of the sensor construction, rather than an add-on component housed in an

extension to the sensor envelope as previously known. In this respect, the lead frame acts not only as a sensor support and means of electrically connecting power and signal inputs to and from the sensor, but also as means of 5 electrically connecting power to the EEPROM and also transmission of signals into and out from the EEPROM. Further, the lead frame provides the basic structure of the connector used to interface the completed sensor system to external circuitry.

10 Conveniently, the device further comprises a cap which covers at least some of the portions of the conducting lead frame not covered by the plastics housing. Such a cap could be a separate moulding which snaps onto the sensor housing or the cap could be moulded directly onto the 15 device during an additional moulding step. The cap provides protection for the exposed parts of the lead frame and any electronic components attached thereto.

Preferably, the lead frame is overmoulded by the plastics housing in two steps rather than one, so that the 20 plastics housing comprises at least an inner portion and an outer portion, the outer portion being moulded around the inner portion. Alternatively, the two steps could be combined into one. However, by forming the housing in two steps, it is possible to tune the properties of the 25 plastics materials used to suit the sensor and the application. For example, different plastics may be used to form the outer and inner parts of the housing. Also, in practice, it is difficult to mould a relatively large volume of material around the lead frame in a single step.

30 It is preferable that the or each gas sensitive element is a semiconductor gas sensor although other forms of sensor might be employed such as those based on conductive polymers or ion selective FET structures. If a semiconductor sensor is employed, preferably the or each 35 semiconductor gas sensor comprises a p-type mixed metal oxide semiconducting material of the first, second and/or third order transition metal series, wherein the

semiconductor gas sensor is responsive to a change in concentration of carbon monoxide in the surrounding atmosphere.

It is further envisaged that certain features of 5 sensors according to the first aspect of the invention may be incorporated into a sensor according the second aspect of the invention, or vice versa. For instance, the overmoulded lead frame can be designed to provide a flameproof seal between the conductive frame and the 10 housing. By providing the sensor with a flame arrestor, the enclosure may be arranged to be flameproof and the device used to detect combustible gases by means of a pellistor or other suitable gas sensitive element.

Examples of a gas sensors incorporating a device for 15 sensing a gas in accordance with the present invention will now be described with reference to the accompanying drawings, in which:-

Figure 1 shows an exploded view of a gas sensing device in accordance with a first aspect of the invention;

20 Figure 2 is a schematic plan view of the housing, gas sensitive elements and conducting leads as shown in Figure 1 but with the conducting leads extending out of the housing;

Figure 2A is a schematic underneath plan showing 25 projections of the uppermost features of the devices as dashed lines, the location of the lead frame in solid lines and shortest distances along the conducting path, though the wall of the housing in bold;

Figure 3 is an underneath plan of the device as shown 30 in Figure 1;

Figure 4 is a section taken on the line A - A in Figure 2, but illustrates a complete device with the exception of the metal bezel 14;

35 Figure 5 comprises Figures 5a and 5b which show, respectively, a plan and a side view of a conducting lead frame before the housing has been moulded around it;

Figure 6 is a circuit diagram of a detecting circuit attached to the device;

Figure 7 is a perspective view of an example of a lead frame which may be employed in a gas sensing device in 5 accordance with a second aspect of the invention;

Figure 8 is a perspective view of the lead frame shown in Figure 7 overmoulded with a first portion of a plastics housing;

Figure 9 is a perspective view of the lead frame shown 10 in Figure 7 overmoulded by both an inner portion of the plastics housing and an outer portion of the plastics housing;

Figure 10 is a perspective view of the assembly shown 15 in Figure 9 with an electronic component shown connected to the lead frame;

Figure 11 is a perspective view of the completed gas sensor device;

Figure 12 is an underneath perspective view of the overmoulded lead frame; and,

Figure 13 is an underneath perspective view of the overmoulded lead frame with the gas sensing element in 20 place.

The gas sensing device shown in Figures 1 to 4 comprises a plastics housing 1, made from a material such 25 as PEI (polyetherimide), PPS (polyphenylsulphide) or PTFE for example, moulded around a metal lead frame 2, which is shown in more detail in Figure 5. The housing includes a wall 10 which surrounds a cavity, at the base of which is a substantially square recess 12 which itself is surrounded 30 by a raised, ridged shelf 11 which is substantially circular. In the floor of the recess 12 are two further recesses 13 containing glass wool 9 which acts as a shock absorber and insulator.

Mounted in the housing 1 are two conventional 35 pellistor gas sensing elements: a detector 4 and a compensator 5. Each element comprises a metal filament encased by a porous bead, the detector element 4 including

also a catalyst which may be chosen according to the gas which is to be detected. The elements 4 and 5 are connected to the lead frame 2 by means of conducting cement or welding, for example. The metal leads are encapsulated 5 by the wall of the housing 10 and exit the housing body as tabs 22-24 as shown in Figures 2 and 3, although in other examples they may not extend through the apertures 18 - 20 as shown in Figure 1.

A second layer of glass wool 8 is located above the 10 gas sensitive elements 4 and 5, inside the recess 12. A hydrogen sulphide filter 7 rests on the housing floor 11a above the recess 12. The H₂S filter 7 is typically fabricated using a paper or glass wool filter impregnated with lead acetate and as such it is desirable that it is 15 inboard of the flame arrestor 3 to prevent users from coming into contact with it. An enclosure is created by the joining of the metal mesh flame arrestor 3 to the top of the shelf 11, which is sufficiently wide to ensure that the resulting joint is at least 1.25mm wide. The mesh 3 20 allows the passage of gas into the cavity yet acts as a flame arrestor and thus renders the enclosure flameproof. A second, silica filter 6 is located on the outboard side of the flame arrestor 3 and comprises a glass fibre disc 25 coated with 25% Si. Its purpose is to absorb chronic, irreversible pellistor catalyst poisons such as the silicone HMDS. The two filters 6 and 7 together remove contaminants from the gas flow into the device. It is also envisaged that plural filters such as 6 and 7 could be combined into a single, multi-purpose filter, although this 30 is not shown in the drawings.

A metal bezel 14 clips onto the housing 1 in order to hold components such as filter 6 in place and to provide the device with protection. The bezel 14 is provided with a number of holes 16 which enable the bezel 14 to be 35 fastened to the housing 1 by means of a corresponding number of barbs 17 on the housing exterior. The bezel 14

also incorporates one or more holes 15 through which gas may enter the device.

The features of the housing 1 are shown in plan view in Figure 2. The dashed lines indicate the position of the 5 lead frame 2. The gas sensitive elements 4 and 5 are connected to the lead frame 2 which emerges from the housing as leads 22 - 24, through apertures 18 - 20. At least 6 mm of each conducting lead is encapsulated by the wall of the housing 1. Figure 2A illustrates the shortest 10 path on each of the three conducting lines which pass through the housing to connect the gas sensitive elements inside the flameproof enclosure to the detecting circuit outside. It is clear that the path marked "Y" is the shortest path and it is this path therefore which requires 15 most scrutiny by the certifying authorities. Generally path "Y" must be at least 6mm long. The lead frame 2 also comprises a trimming resistor 21 which is connected between the leads 23 and 24 and is present to compensate for differences in performance of the two elements 4 and 5.

20 Figure 3 shows that the same leads 22 - 24 may be also accessed from beneath the device, through apertures 25 - 27 respectively, which are formed in an integral, lateral extension of the housing 1. This may be useful, for example, when mounting the device onto a printed circuit 25 board (PCB). Again, the lead frame 2 is represented inside the housing by dashed lines. The circles L, seen also in Figures 1 and 2 are a result of the use of lead frame locating pins during the moulding process.

The arrangement of the layers can be seen most clearly 30 in Figure 4. The gas sensitive elements 4 and 5 are shown to be sandwiched between layers of glass wool 8 and 9 which provide protection from mechanical shock, electrical insulation and insulation from heat loss. In a typical arrangement, the depth of the recess 13 over which the 35 element 4 or 5 is located is approximately 0.5 mm and its diameter 2 mm. The recess 12 above the gas sensitive

elements is generally about 1 mm deep and 5 mm by 5 mm in area. The device has a total height of approximately 4mm.

The all-metal lead frame 2 is shown in more detail in Figure 5, prior to its encapsulation by the plastics housing 1. Once the housing 1 has been moulded around the lead frame 2, the metal is cut along line 34 to separate the conducting leads. This line need not coincide with the outer edge of the plastics housing and in particular conducting leads may be left protruding from the housing, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. It is envisaged that the lead frame is constructed from beryllium copper, with a hard acid gold plating layer, substantially 0.5 microns in thickness, over electroless nickel. However, any number of other variants could in principle satisfy the same requirements of good mechanical stability, resistance to degradation caused by aggressive operational environments and good electrical conductivity. It would also be possible to have a lead frame 2 in the form of a pre-moulded subassembly, in which the joining part 35 is an insulating material and may therefore remain attached, for example to assist in placing the device into an instrument. As shown in Figure 5b, the lead frame 2 need not be flat. In the example shown, most of the interior portion of the lead frame 2 is raised slightly with respect to the exterior parts.

The detector element 4 is connected between points 28 and 29 on the lead frame 2, and the compensator element 5 between points 30 and 31 by means of conducting cement or welding, for example. The trimming resistor 21 joins points 32 and 33. Layers 8 and 9 of glass wool are packed above and below the elements 4 and 5 and a filter 7 is positioned on the housing floor, on top of the glass wool 8. The flame arrestor 3 is joined around its perimeter to the top of the shelf 11 of the housing 1 by means of a thermal bonding process such as heat staking. Filter 6 is then located on the outboard side of the flame arrestor, and held in place by the metal bezel 14, which is

mechanically fastened to the housing by means of barbs 17 and holes 16. In use, gas passes though the bezel 14, the flame arrestor 3, both filters 6 and 7 and at least one layer of glass wool 8 to reach the detecting element 4.

5 Figure 6 is a circuit diagram to illustrate a Wheatstone bridge circuit which incorporates the two elements 4 and 5. As described above, the elements are coupled to leads 22 - 24, with a trimming resistor 21 between leads 23 and 24. The lead 24 forms one output 36 of the circuit directly. Leads 22 and 23 are joined to resistors R1 and R2 at points 37 and 38 respectively. Resistors R1 and R2 are connected at point 39 to a variable resistor 40. Point 39 also provides the second output 41. DC power is supplied to the circuit at 42, and is used to 10 heat the elements 4 and 5 to their working temperature of approximately 500°C as well as to power the circuit. However, it should be noted that the sensors could also be 15 operated in circuits other than the Wheatstone bridge described above.

20 An example of a gas sensing device in accordance with a second aspect of the invention will now be described with reference to Figures 7 to 13. The sensing device consists of a conductive lead frame 100, partially encapsulated by a plastics housing 106 and 107, a gas sensitive element 25 connected to the conducting lead frame 100 and an electronic component 110 also connected to the conducting lead frame 100.

20 A conducting lead frame 100 is shown in Figure 7. This component performs a number of functions. In particular, it provides physical support for the sensor, 30 electrical connections to and from the sensor, electrical connections to and from any additional components which may be incorporated within the gas sensing device, interconnections between the sensor and the additional 35 electronic components and the basic structure of the electrical connector used to interface the completed device to the remainder of the operating circuitry.

The lead frame 100 may be constructed from a range of conductive materials, typically metals such as copper or steel. Nickel-coated phosphor bronze is particularly well suited to the application. The lead frame 100 may be 5 fabricated in a number of ways, for example by a photolithography and etching sequence, or by a series of stamping and bending processes (progressive forming). The detailed shape of the structure is dictated by not only the requirements of the sensor and additional component 10 circuitry but also the eventual physical envelope of the completed assembly.

Four pad areas 103 are provided on the lead frame 100 to allow connection to the gas sensitive element itself. Tabs 104 are formed into an array to facilitate direct 15 connection of integrated circuit or discreet electronic components. The lead frame 100 illustrated in the Figures accepts an 8-pin package, but larger or smaller numbers of connections may be envisaged. It will be noted that some of tabs 104 are commoned together; others are connected to 20 one or more of the sensor pads. In one case, a direct link between the two tabs across the electronic component is shown. Several tabs 104 are formed as extensions of connector pins 105 which act as the basis of the external connector.

25 In this initial form, the lead frame is provided with sacrificial parts 101 and 102 which greatly assist in handling the components during subsequent fabrication processes but which may be removed at appropriate stages by cutting or snapping along lines A and B which are provided 30 with weakening grooves for this purpose.

The sensor housing 106 and 107 is formed by means of injection moulding with the lead frame in situ. In other words, the lead frame is positioned inside the mould during 35 the injection moulding process. The housing is fabricated from thermoplastic materials such as polyphenylene sulphide (PPS) or liquid crystal polymer (LCP), although a range of such materials is available. A two-stage moulding process

is used in which either the same or different polymeric materials may be used in each stage. This selection is largely dictated by the particular properties demanded of the finished component. For example, when using heated 5 sensors, it may be that the region immediately surrounding the gas sensing element is required to have very stable properties at high temperature. In contrast, the external casing may need to offer resistance against a number of contaminants. Suitable polymeric materials may be employed 10 for each location. Clearly, the plastic must be an electrical insulator to prevent short circuiting the lead frame 100.

In a first moulding step, a thermoplastic material is injection moulded around the lead frame 100 in order to 15 form an inner portion 106 of the sensor housing. It should be noted that this first in situ moulding step leaves pad areas 103, tabs 104 and the ends of connector pins 105 exposed. In its unsupported state, the lead frame is fragile and flexible since the component is intended to be 20 fully encapsulated in the final device. Thicker and hence more expensive lead frames could be used to partially alleviate this problem, but in applications demanding very low cost, this is not an attractive option. Therefore, an important feature of this first moulding step is that it 25 provides strength and so eases handling difficulties during the remaining processing stages. Once the initial moulding has been completed, the sacrificial extensions 101 and 102 may be removed, although in some circumstances, it may be helpful to leave either or both extensions in place until 30 the subsequent moulding stage is complete.

Figure 9 shows the gas sensing device after a second moulding step, in which the assembly as shown in Figure 8 is overmoulded by a second volume of thermoplastic material. As discussed above, this material may be the 35 same or different to that used in the first moulding step. The second thermoplastic material forms an outer portion 107 of the sensor housing. Like the inner portion 106, the

outer portion 107 may be formed by in situ injection moulding. Two separate injection moulding tools may be used for the two stages, or a single tool allowing two or moulding shots might be used instead. As shown in Figure 5, the outer portion 107 of the housing still leaves the pads 103 and tabs 104 exposed for component attachment. The second moulding step also forms the remainder of the connector shroud 108 and circular features 109 which are used to attach the completed device to the required 10 apparatus.

It would be possible to overmould the lead frame 100 in a single step to produce the whole casing. However, this would not allow the material properties to be varied and could damage the lead frame. A limited amount of 15 material can be moulded around such a flexible component as the lead frame 100 in a single step without causing significant distortion.

An electronic component 110, such as an EEPROM, is attached to the exposed lead frame at tabs 104 via 20 component legs 111. These are preferably joined by soldering, and a re-flow process is advantageous in this context. However, conducting adhesive or other known methods can be used to secure and make electrical connection to component 110 (Figure 10). In order to 25 complete this part of the assembly, a pre-moulded top 112, shown in Figure 11, is attached to housing 107 either by snap-fit methods, or glueing, welding or other bonding means. If required, top 112 can be made in a detachable 30 form to allow component 110 to be changed, but this is unlikely to be cost effective in low-price applications. Top 112 could be overmoulded in an additional moulding step, although the effect of the high temperatures upon the electronic components 110 would need to be ascertained.

The underside of the assembly is shown in Figure 12. 35 The housing 107 encloses a volume 113 into which a gas sensitive element may be fitted. Pad areas 103 of the conducting lead frame 100 are exposed within the enclosure,

allowing a gas sensitive element 114 to be inserted into the cavity and electrically connected via leads 115 using soldering or conducting adhesive, for example (Figure 13). In the example shown, sensor 114 is a planar device 5 employing a semiconducting material whose electrical properties vary in response to the composition of the surrounding gas atmosphere. Particularly, a p-type mixed metal oxide semiconducting material of the first, second and/or third order transition metal series may be selected, 10 which is responsive to a change in concentration of carbon monoxide in the surrounding atmosphere and also to a change in the concentration of oxygen in the surrounding atmosphere. For example, the sensor 114 shown could comprise chromium titanium oxide, but other forms of sensor 15 might be employed, such as those based on conducting polymers or ion selective FET structures.

After attachment of the sensor 114, the enclosure may be sealed if required by a mesh, sinter, cap, membrane or other means allowing ingress of gas to the enclosed volume. 20 This may advantageously be mounted on lip 116 by a suitable method such as heat staking, welding or glueing, depending on the intended application. Filters may also be incorporated in-board or out-board of the seal, and retained by the seal or another closure component.

25 In this example, the electrical component 110 is shown as a memory chip which might contain a variety of information useful to the sensor operator, such as calibration data or data relating to the target gas species. It is envisaged that the connections provided by 30 pins 105 would allow this data to be interrogated by the user and this is also quite feasible that rewriting of the data into user accessible regions of the memory could be undertaken, perhaps as a result of in-field calibrations. Additionally, or instead of a memory chip such as a EEPROM, 35 the lead frame could readily support a range of other components such as analogue to digital converters, amplifiers or microprocessors.

The completed gas sensing device may be mounted to any desired surface by means of fixing points 109 (Figure 9) with screws or nails for example. The device may be electrically connected to an external circuit via 5 connection pins 105. The pins 105 are housed within a connector shroud 108 which may be designed to fit with a connection plug.

CLAIMS

1. A device for sensing a gas, the device comprising a plastics housing moulded in situ around at least one portion of a conducting lead frame, the housing defining an enclosure and being provided with means for enabling gas flow into the enclosure, and at least one gas sensitive element within the enclosure mounted to the conducting lead frame, wherein the conducting lead frame comprises connection leads ~~which~~ are accessible through, and are at least partially encapsulated by, the wall of the housing.
2. A device for sensing a gas, the device comprising at least one gas sensitive element contained within a flameproof, plastics housing supporting a flame arrestor which enables gas to flow into the interior of the housing, and the gas sensitive element(s) being connected to conducting leads which are accessible through, and are at least partially encapsulated by, the wall of the housing, the encapsulating wall having sufficient thickness such that the housing will not allow the propagation of an ignition source from within the device to the ambient atmosphere, under working conditions.
3. A device according to claim 2, wherein the plastics housing is fabricated by moulding in situ the plastics material directly around the conducting leads.
4. A device according to claim 2 or claim 3, wherein the flame arrestor is located above the gas sensitive element(s), the conducting leads being accessible, for example extending out, through a side wall of the housing.
5. A device according to claim 4, wherein the conducting leads are coupled with respective contacts located in an integral extension of the housing.
6. A device according to any of claims 2 to 5, wherein the conducting leads are provided by a conducting lead frame fabricated prior to encapsulation by the plastics housing.

7. A device according to any of claims 2 to 6, wherein the flame arrestor is a metal mesh.
8. A device according to any of claims 2 to 7, wherein the flame arrestor is joined to the plastics housing by a 5 process of thermal bonding around its perimeter.
9. A device according to any of the preceding claims, further comprising at least one filter in order to remove contaminants from the gas flow into the device.
10. A device according to claim 9, which further comprises 10 means for retaining components located outboard of the flame arrestor.
11. A device according to claim 10, wherein the retaining means is provided by a bezel which fastens mechanically to the housing.
- 15 12. A device according to any of claims 9 to 11, wherein the filter, or at least one of the filters, removes hydrogen sulphide from the gas flow into the device.
13. A device according to any of claims 9 to 12, wherein at least one of the filter(s) is inboard of the flame 20 arrestor.
14. A device according to any of the preceding claims, further comprising means for protecting one or more of the gas sensitive element(s) from shock damage.
15. A device according to any of the preceding claims, 25 further comprising means for insulating the gas sensitive element(s) and electrical connections, either in terms of electrical insulation or heat insulation, or both.
16. A device according to claims 14 and 15, wherein the protecting and/or insulating means comprise at least one 30 layer of shock absorbent and insulating material.
17. A device according to any of claims 14 to 16, wherein the shock absorbent and/or insulating material is glass wool.
18. A device according to any of the preceding claims, 35 further comprising a compensating element.
19. A device according to claim 18, wherein the detecting element comprises a catalytic bead.

20. A device according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the or each gas sensitive element and/or compensating element is positioned at least partly within a or a respective recess in an interior wall of the 5 housing.

21. A device according to claim 20, wherein the or each recess also contains means for the protection and insulation of the gas sensitive element and/or compensating element positioned at least partly inside it.

10 22. A device according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the thickness of the portion of the housing wall through which the conducting leads extend is substantially at least 6 mm.

15 23. A device according to claim 1 or claim 6, which further comprises an electronic component mounted onto at least some of the portions of the conducting lead frame not covered by the plastics housing.

24. A device according to claim 23, wherein the electronic component is a memory component.

20 25. A device according to claim 24, wherein the electronic memory component is an EEPROM.

26. A device according to claim 24 or claim 25, wherein the electronic memory component stores data relating to the or each gas sensitive element.

25 27. A device according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the plastics housing comprises at least an inner portion and an outer portion, the outer portion being moulded around the inner portion.

28. A device according to any of claims 1, 6 or 23 to 27 30 which further comprises a cap which covers at least some of the portions of the conducting lead frame not covered by the plastics housing.

29. A device according to any of the preceding claims, wherein the or each gas sensitive element is a 35 semiconductor gas sensor.

30. A device according to claim 29, wherein the or each semiconductor gas sensor comprises a p-type mixed metal oxide semiconducting material of the first, second and/or

third order transition metal series and wherein the semiconductor gas sensor is responsive to a change in concentration of carbon monoxide in the surrounding atmosphere and to a change in concentration of oxygen in
5 the surrounding atmosphere.

31. A method of manufacturing a device for sensing a gas, the method comprising moulding a plastics housing in situ around at least one portion of a conducting lead frame such that the housing defines an enclosure, providing the
10 housing with means for enabling gas flow into the enclosure, mounting at least one gas sensitive element inside the enclosure and connecting it to the conducting lead frame, and providing the conducting lead frame with connection leads which are accessible through, and at least
15 partially encapsulated by, the wall of the housing.

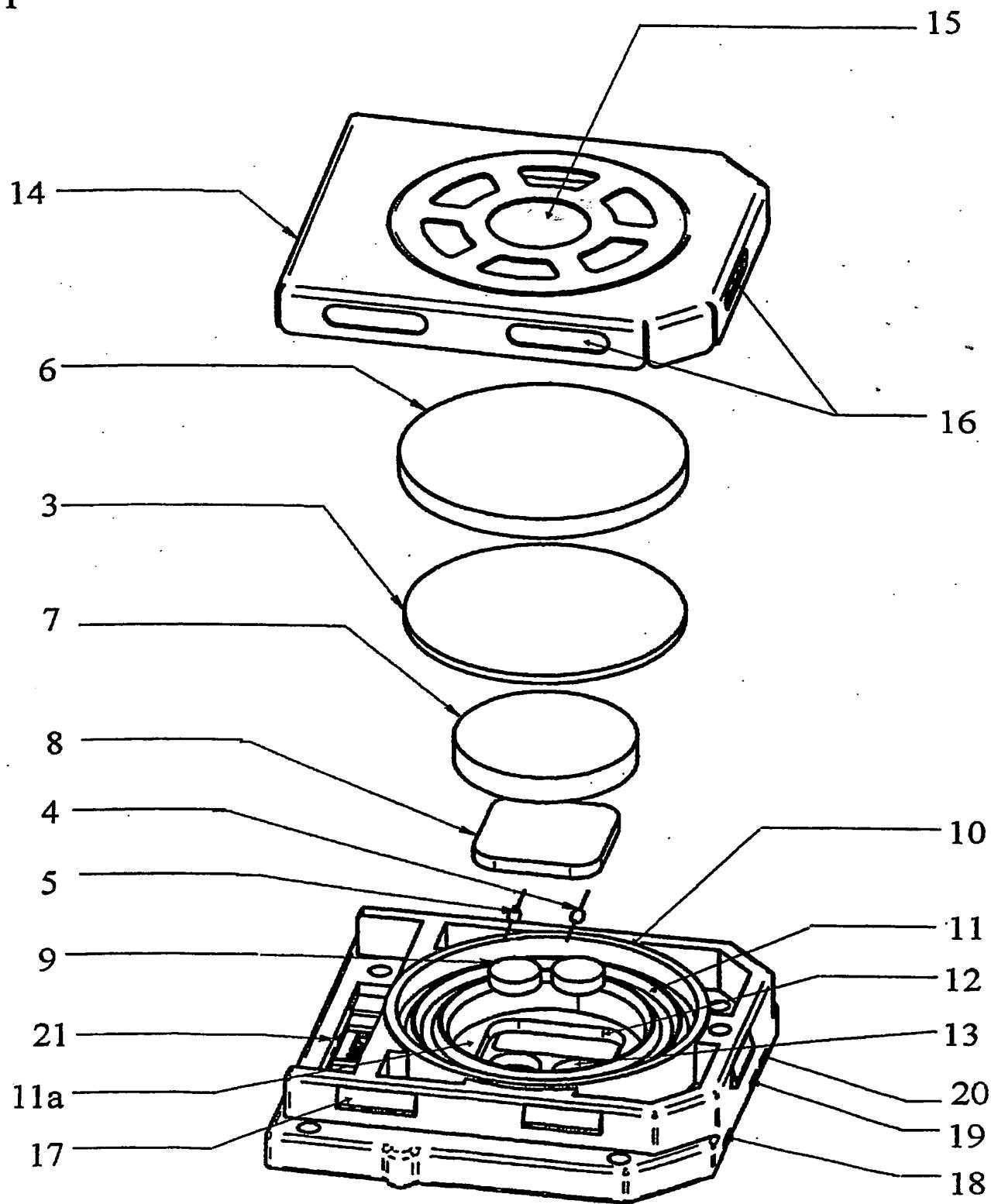
32. A method according to claim 31, wherein the plastics housing is moulded around at least a portion of the conducting lead frame in two steps.

33. A method of manufacturing a device for sensing a gas, the method comprising moulding a plastics housing in situ directly around a set of conducting leads, mounting at least one gas sensitive element inside the housing and connecting it or them to the conducting leads which are accessible through, and at least partially encapsulated by,
20 the wall of the housing, the encapsulating wall having sufficient thickness that the housing will not allow the propagation of an ignition source from within the device to the ambient atmosphere, under working conditions, and securing a flame arrestor to the housing which completes
25 the flameproof enclosure yet enables gas to flow into the interior.

34. A method according to claim 33, wherein the flame arrestor is joined to the plastics housing by a process of thermal bonding around its perimeter.

35. 35. A method according to any of claims 31 to 34, for constructing a device for sensing a gas according to any of claims 1 to 30.

Fig. 1



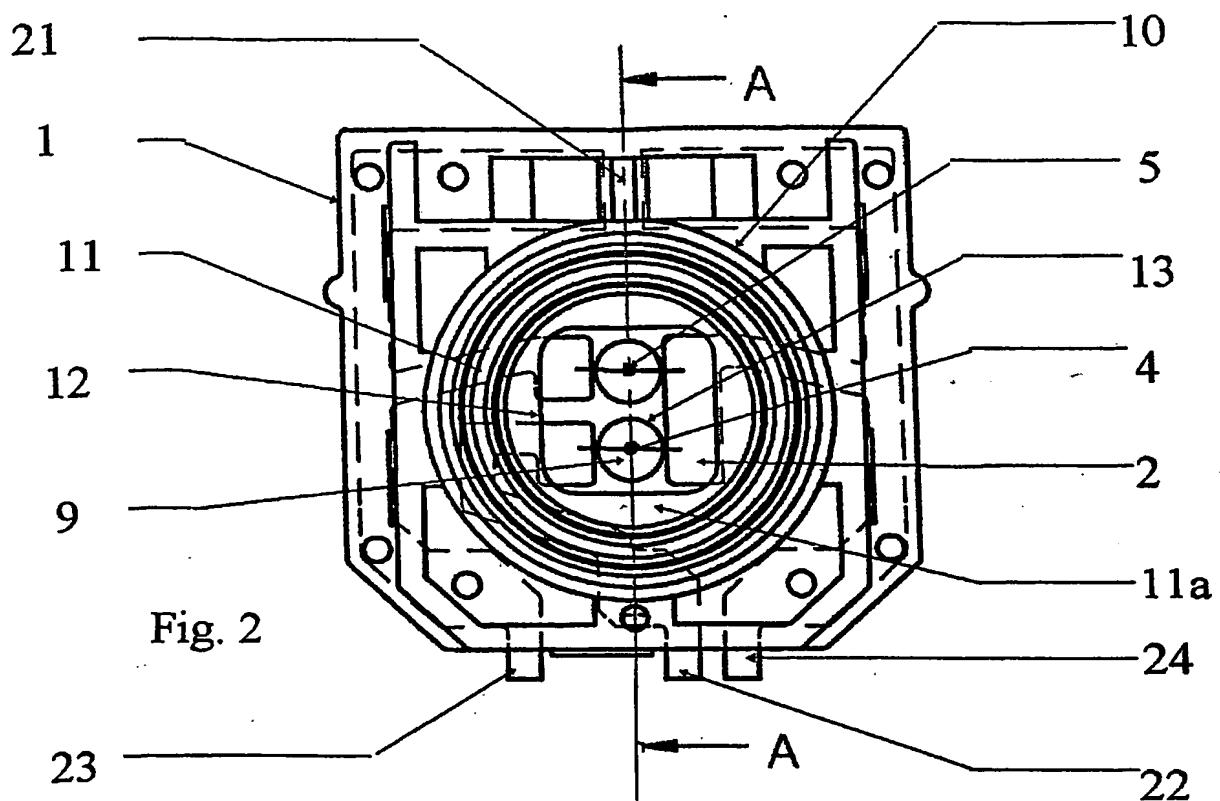
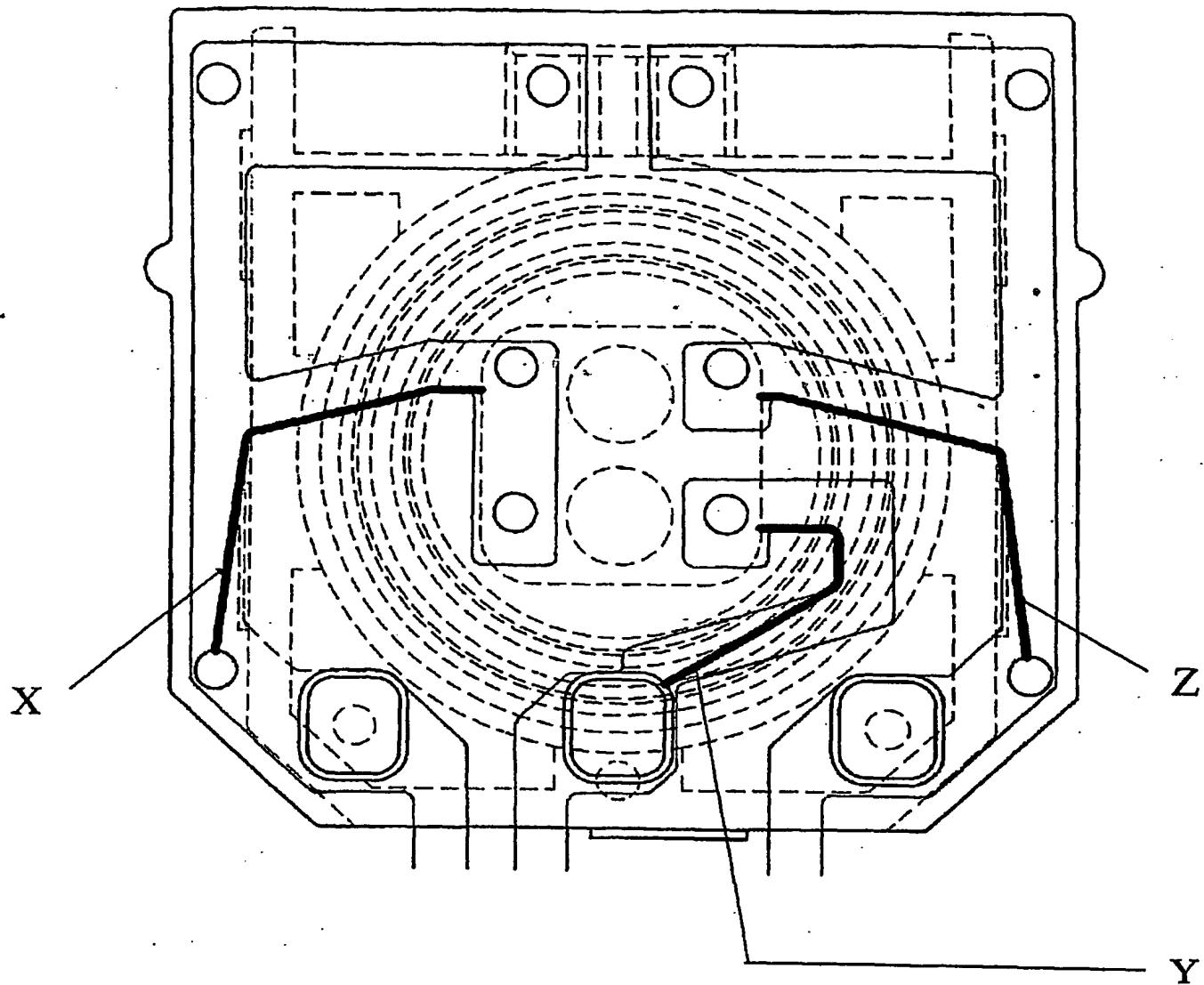


Fig. 2A



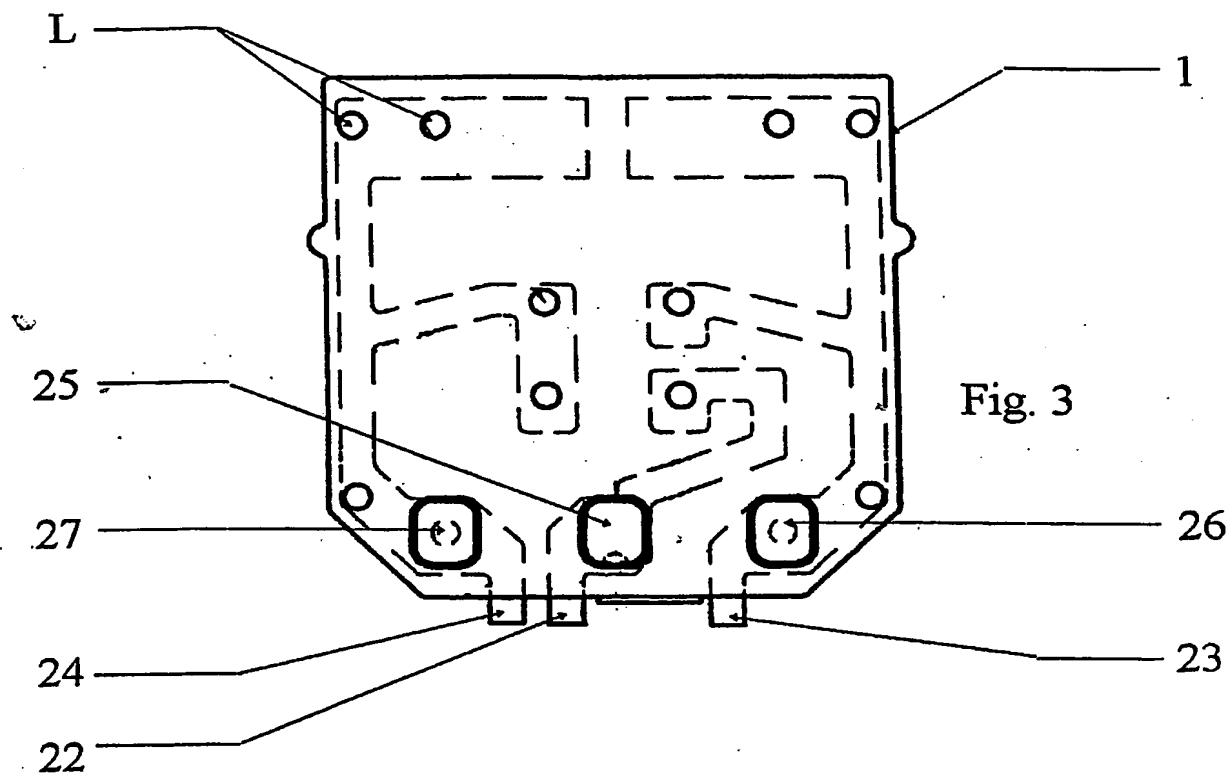


Fig. 4

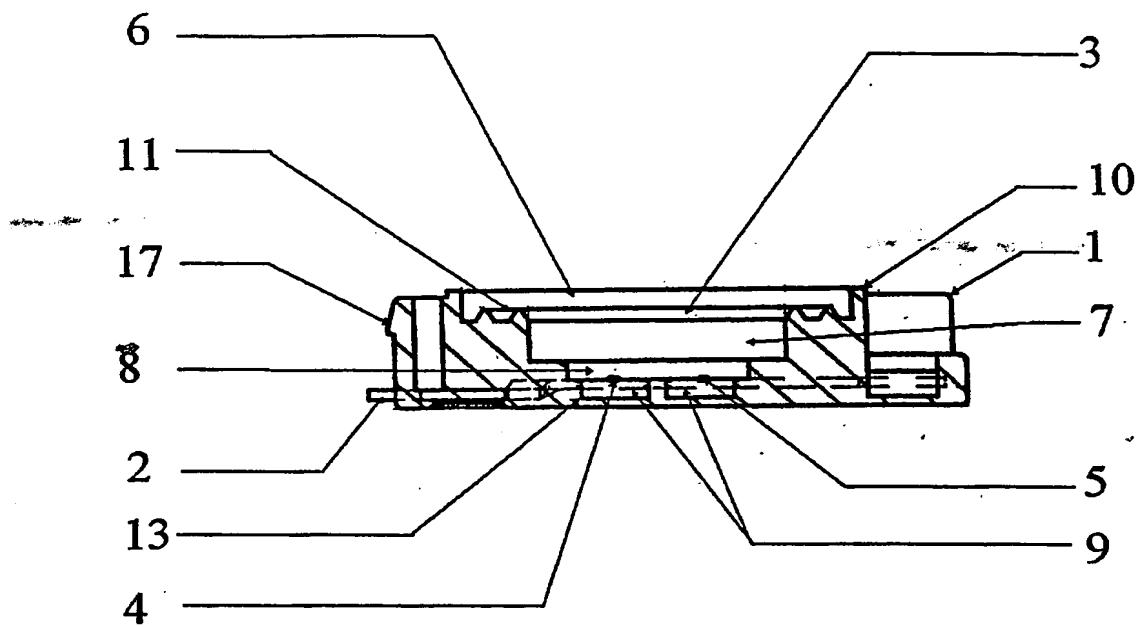


Fig. 5a

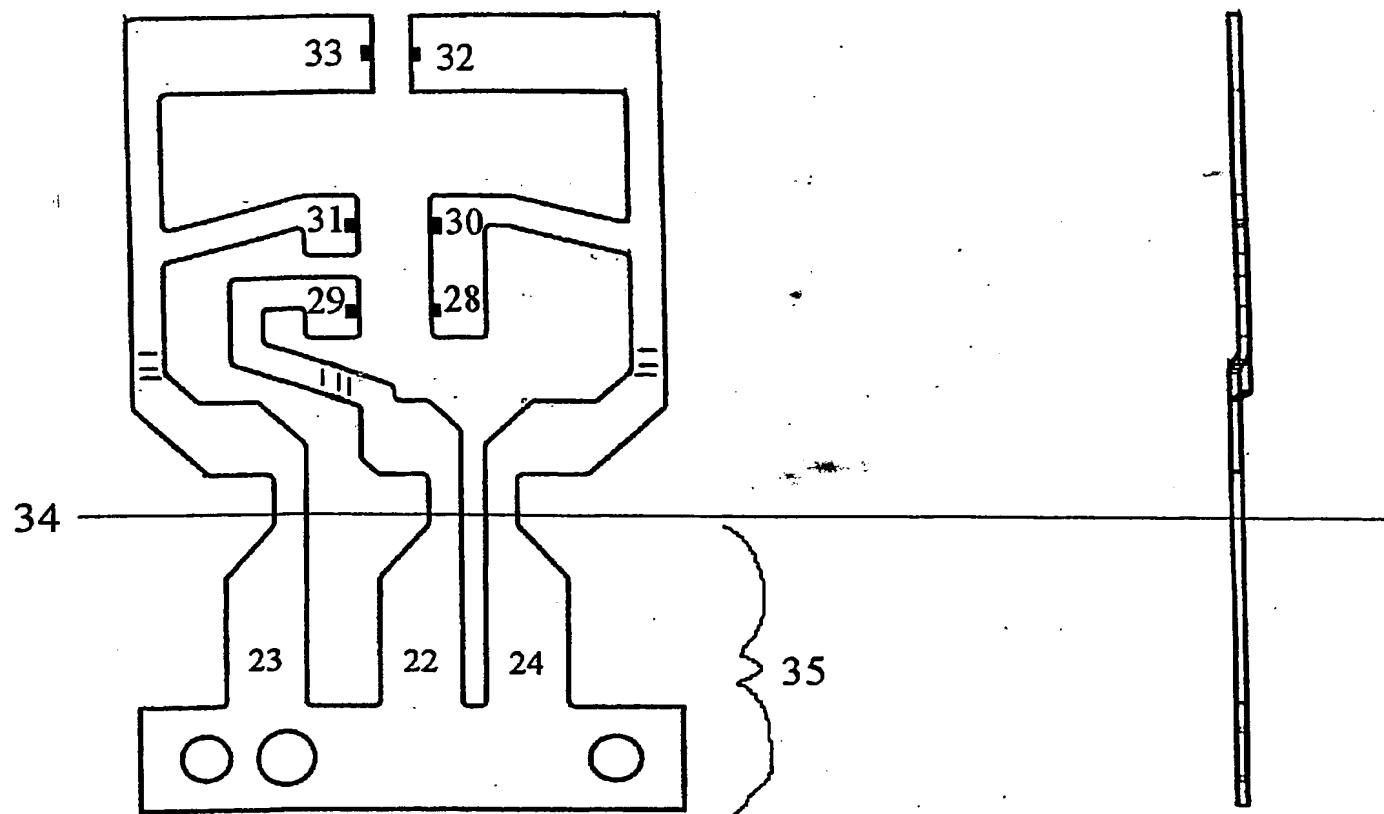


Fig. 5b

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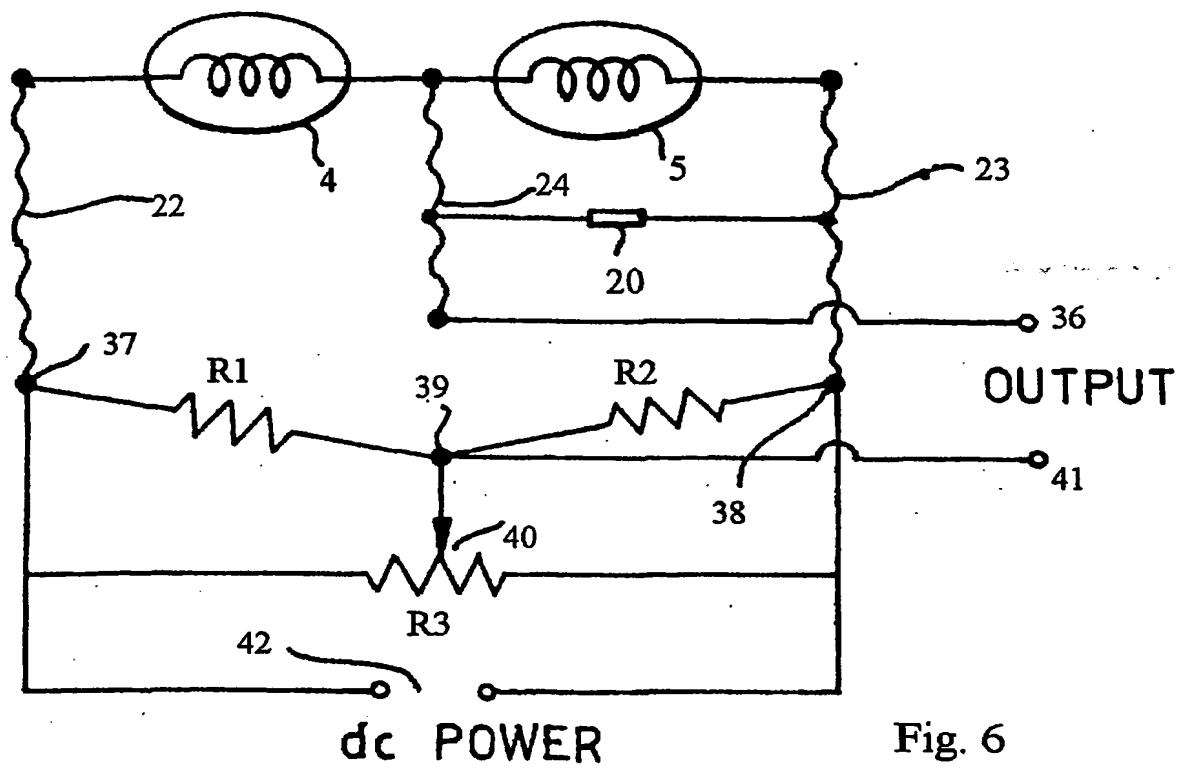


Fig. 6

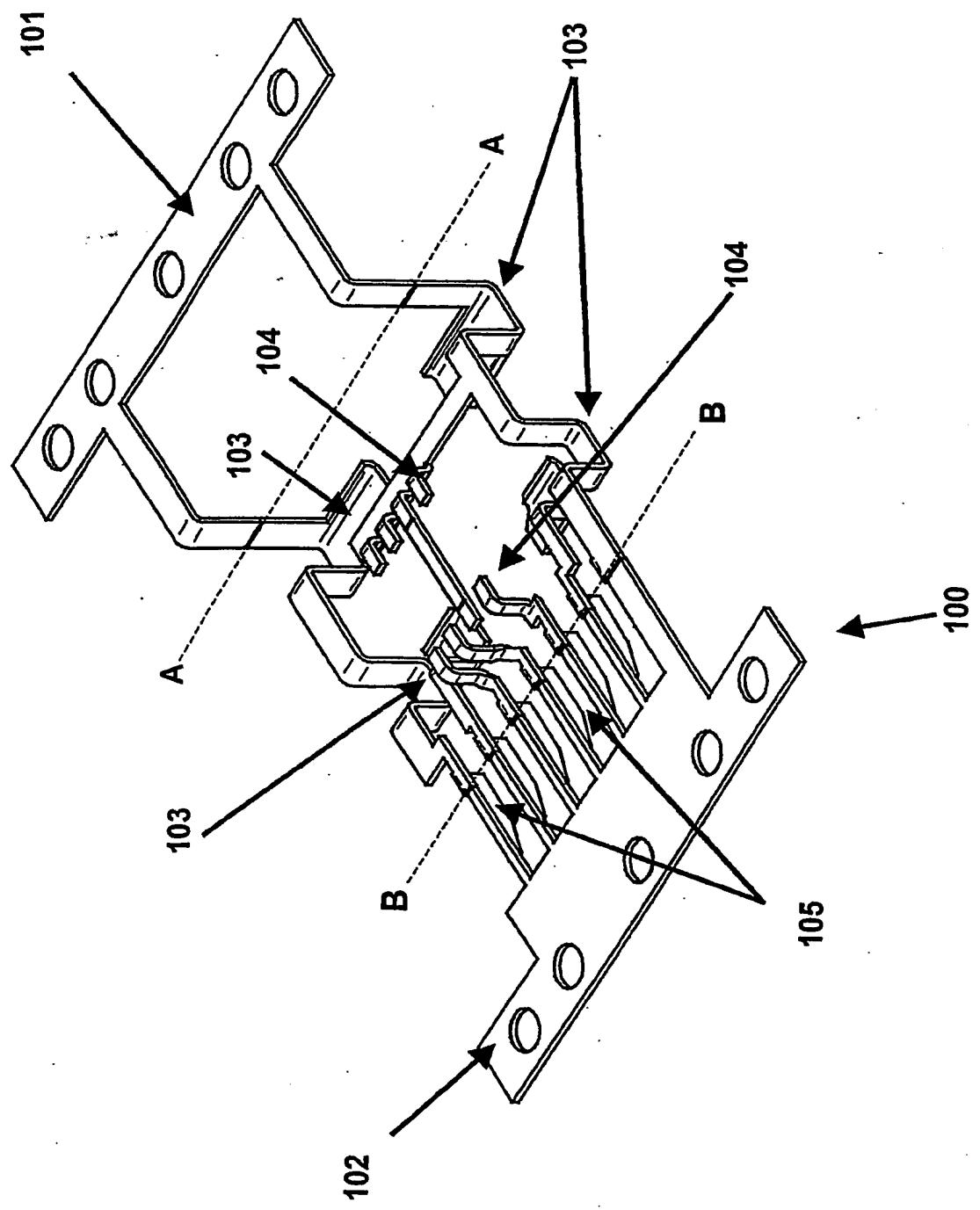


Fig. 7

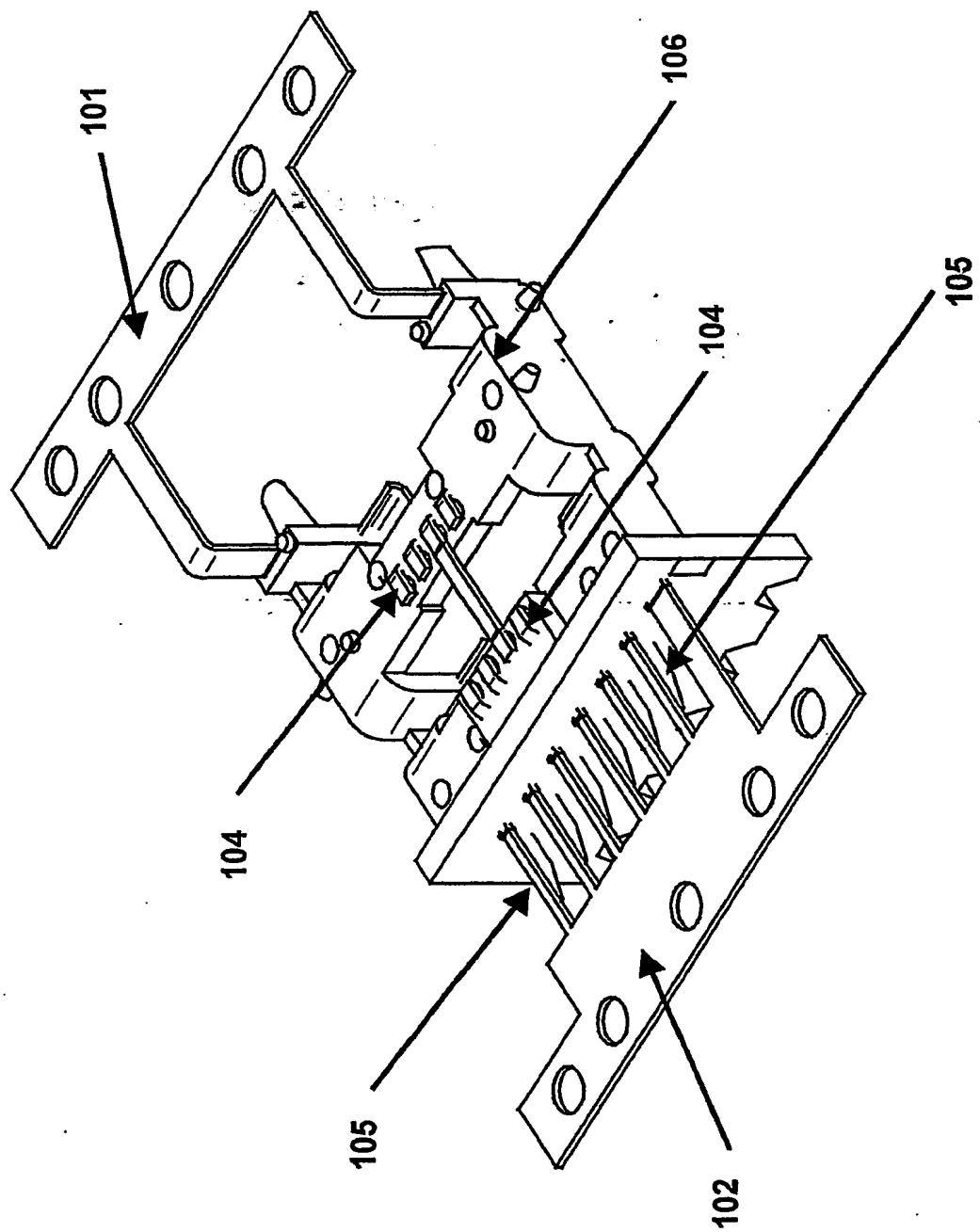


Fig. 8

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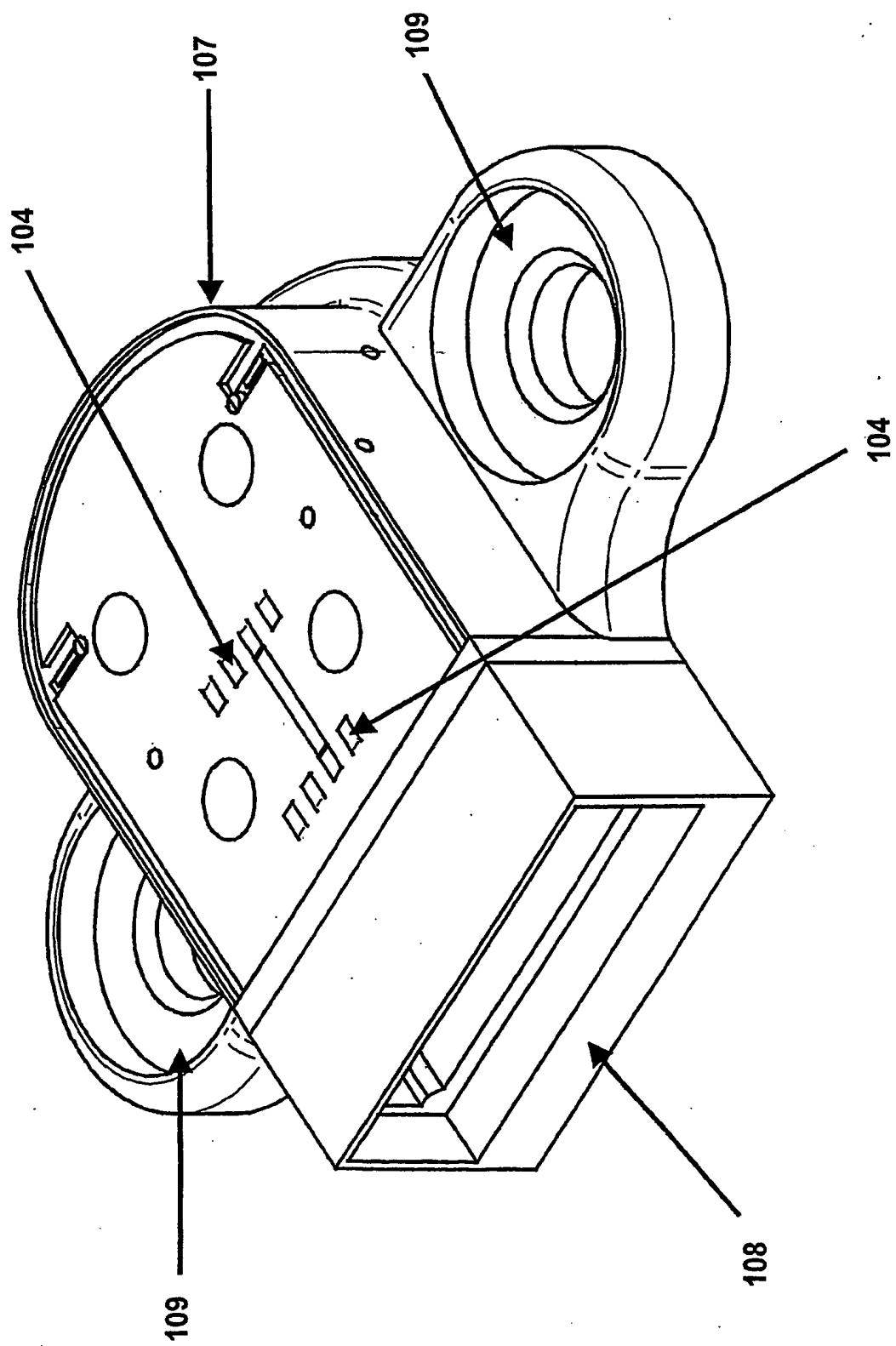


Fig. 9

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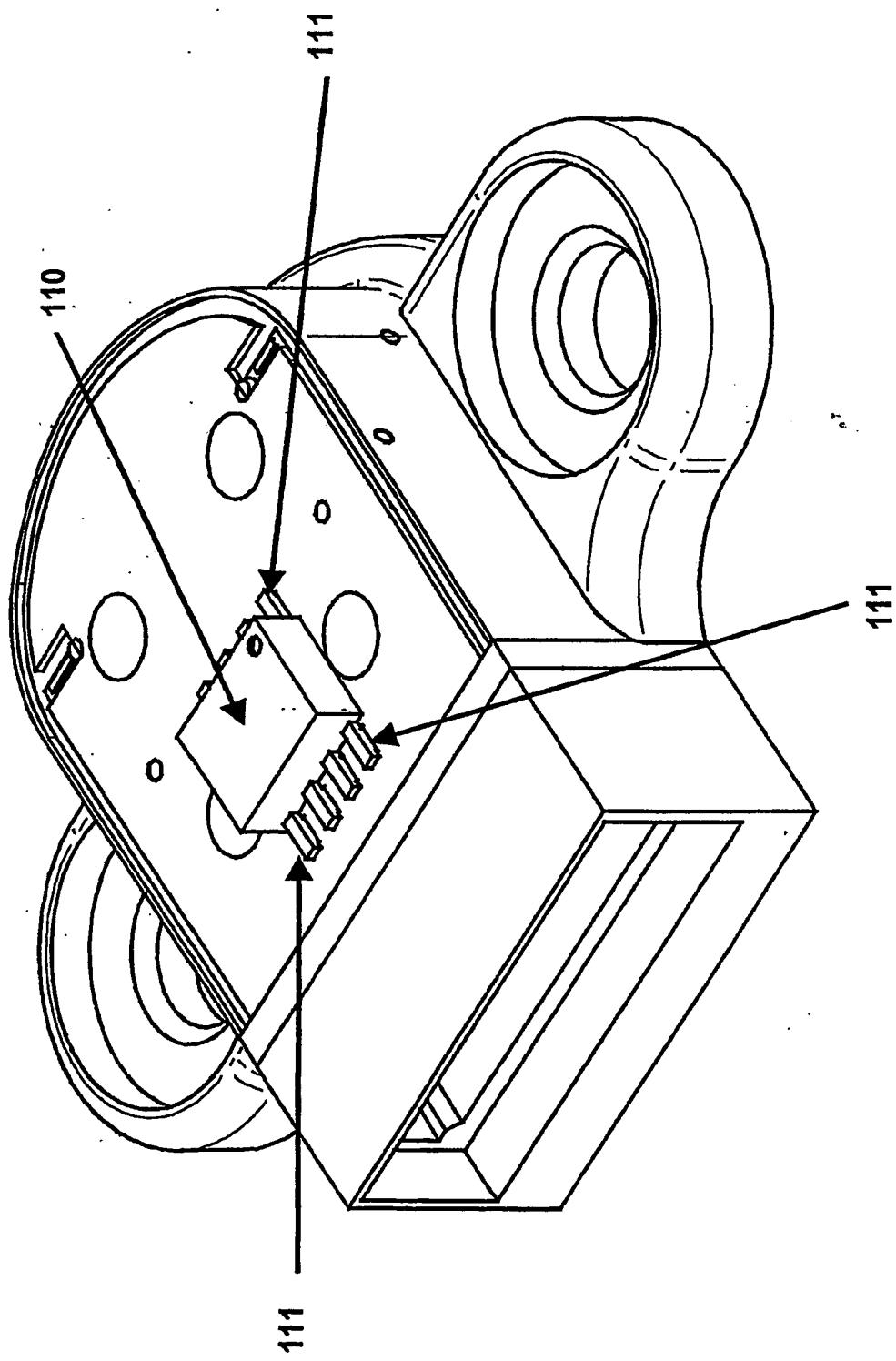


Fig. 10

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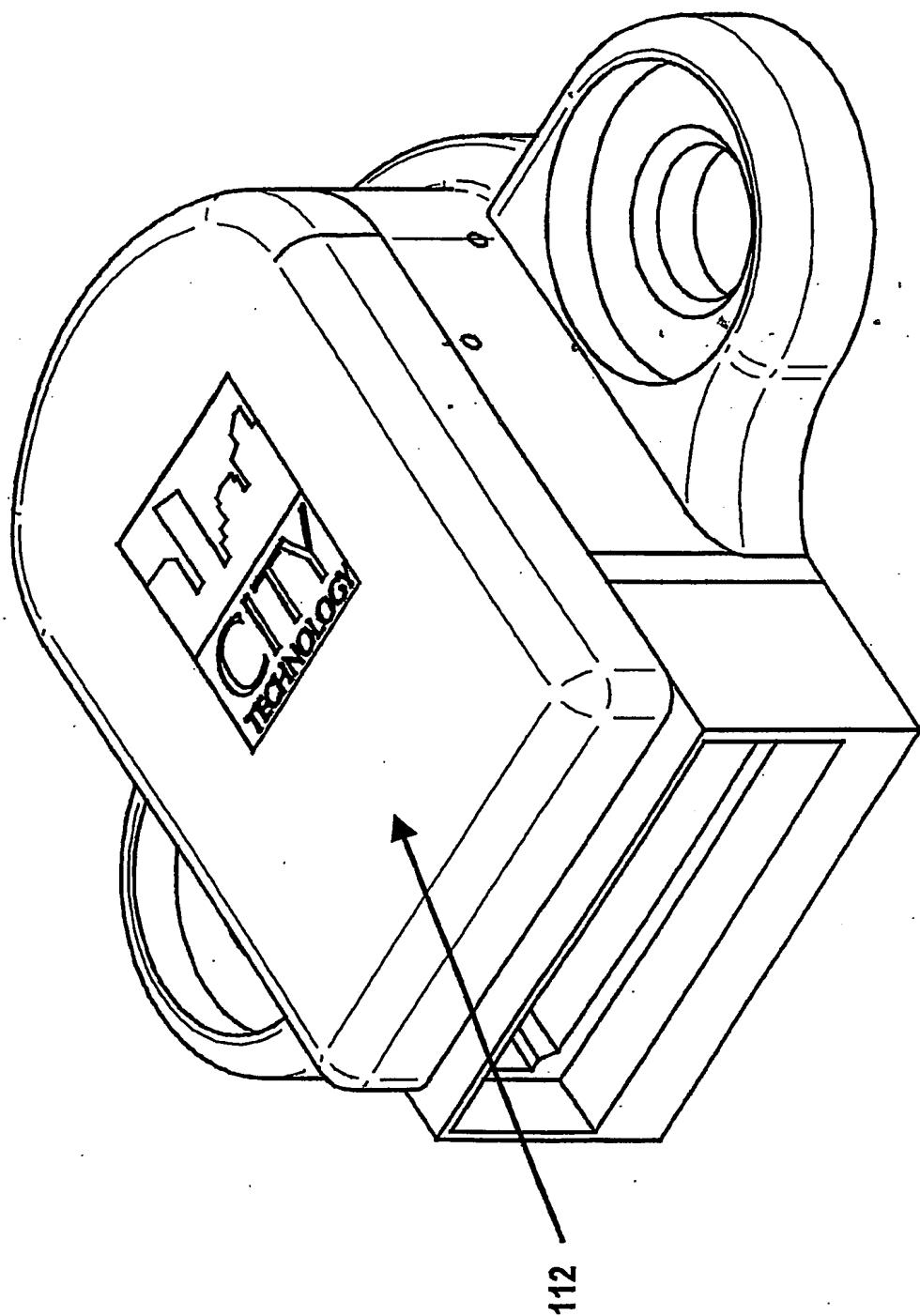


Fig. 11

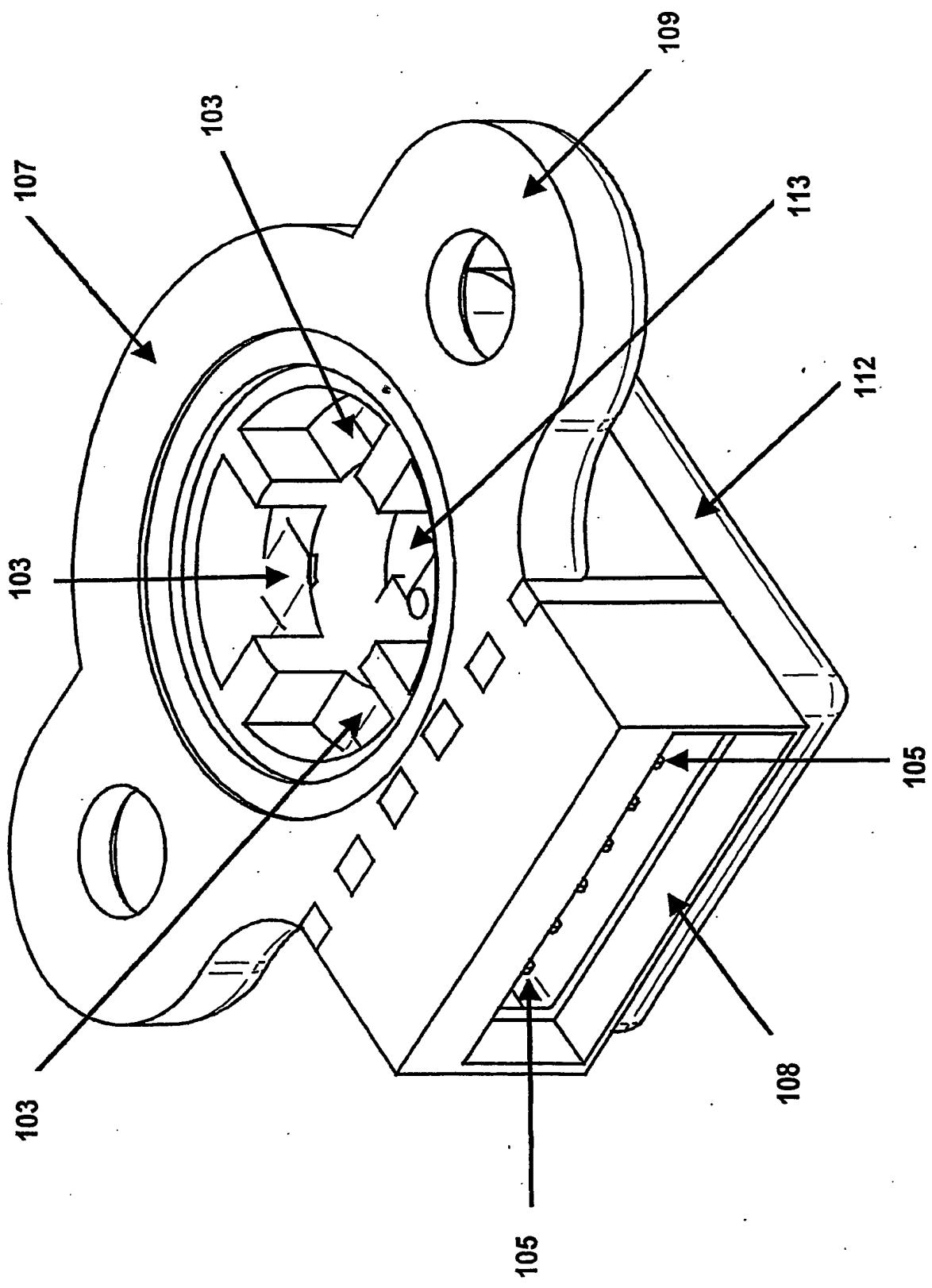


Fig. 12

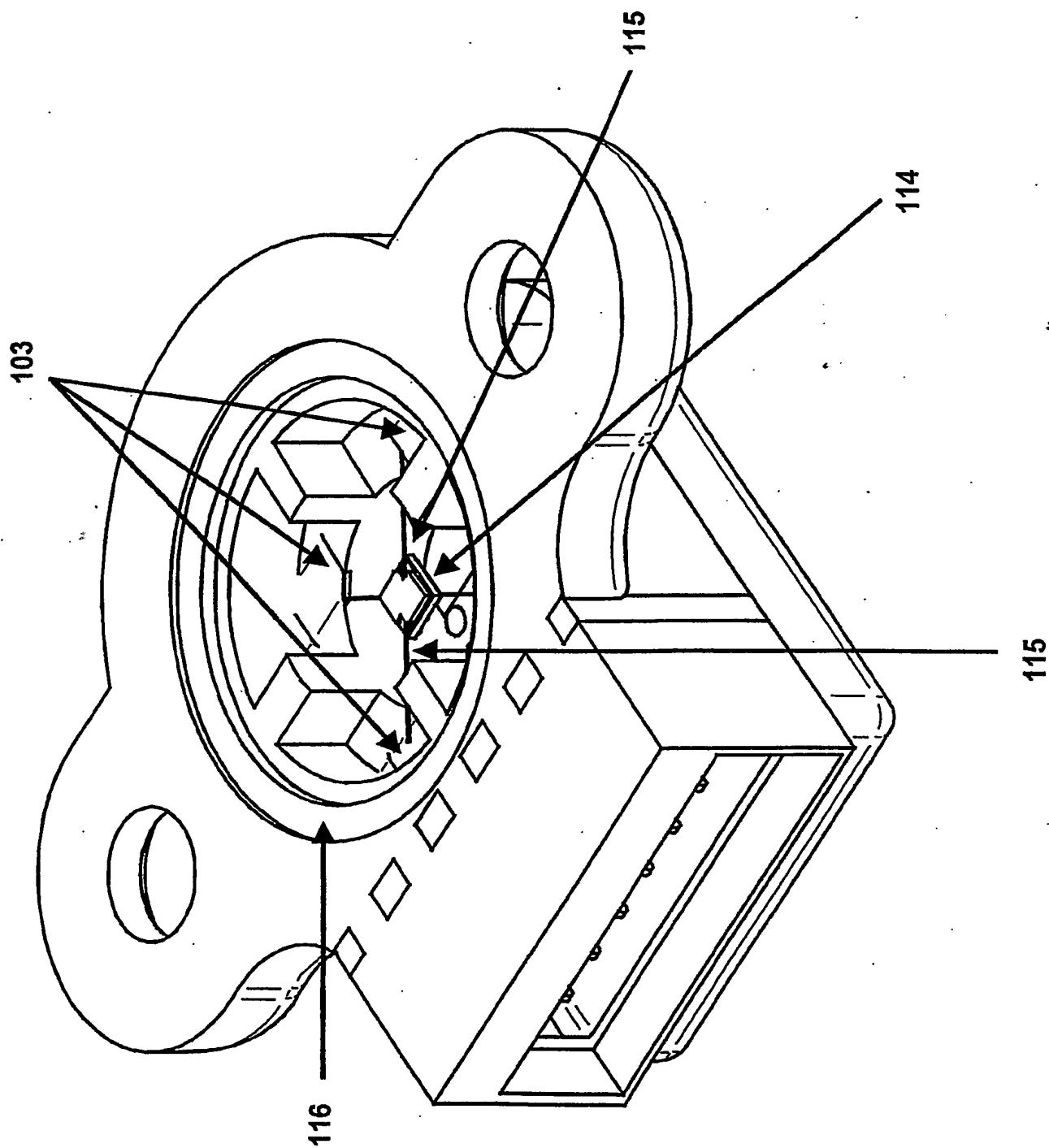


Fig. 13

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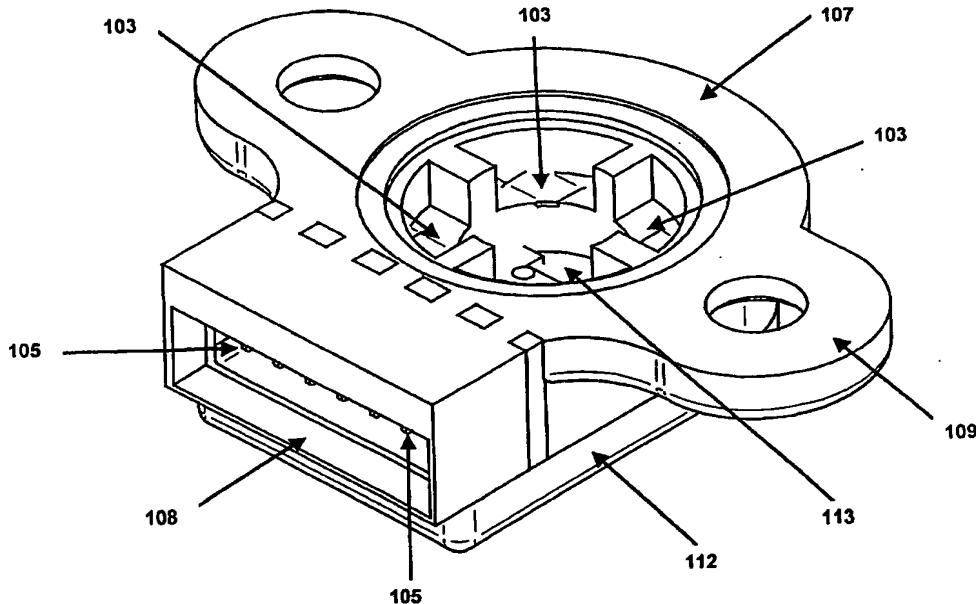
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C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	DE 35 14 830 A (HARALDSTED HANS HENDRIK) 31 October 1985 (1985-10-31) abstract page 4, line 25 – page 5, line 11; figure 1	1, 2, 31
A	DE 198 28 662 A (SIEMENS AG) 5 January 2000 (2000-01-05) abstract column 2, line 48 – column 3, line 7; figure 1	1-31
A	US 6 351 982 B1 (LEGG MARTIN CHARLES ET AL) 5 March 2002 (2002-03-05) abstract column 3, line 62 – column 4, line 20; figure 1	1-31

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Date of the actual completion of the International search	Date of mailing of the International search report
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